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# *Intellectual Discourse*

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the insurgent potential of language in constructing alternative social, cultural and political visions for our society.

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**Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia.** By Rachel Leow. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 281. ISBN 978-1-107-14853-6.

*Reviewer:* Khairil Izamin Ahmad, Department of Political Science, International Islamic University Malaysia. E-mail: ikhairil@iium.edu.my

One of the features of the modern state is its insistence on managing the diversity that is to be found within its territory. Today, a scientific assumption of the modern state in the social sciences is that it is the institution through which all elements that exist within its territory are organised. As Foucault would put it, such understanding of the state is our *regime of truth*, the hegemonic conception from where our thinking about society must depart. In an age where we readily accept the *fact of pluralism* (to borrow from Rawls) within our societies, we at the same time expect that this plurality is managed by the state, so as not to allow it to be the cause of conflict and instability. In addition, in spite of our differences, the state is seen as the fount of national unity.

Of course, the above is not the full story. For any hegemonic conception is subject to contestation and critique. Rachel Leow's *Taming Babel: Language in the Making of Malaysia* puts forward such a critique. *Taming Babel* is a critical study of how language is managed in a polyglottic context, against the background of the modern government's anxiety over the confusion that plurilingualism may cause to its practices of governance. Invoking the story of Babel and its many interpretations (the story of the modern state is akin to the classical interpretation, that plurilingualism is a tragedy), Leow problematises the modern state's insistence on taming the plurality of languages within its bounded territories. Specifically, Leow critically examines the conditions that have allowed for the possibility of the emergence of the concepts of *Cina* (Chineseness) and *Melayu* (Malayness) in colonial and postcolonial Malaysia. They are concepts which emergence has subsumed deeper diversities, pluralities, and multitudes within the communities that are defined as inhabiting either domain. In discussing

language, rather than talk about physical or political borders, Leow talks about mental borders, through which those racialised labels are erected. As such, the book shows that language plays an important role in affecting changes in identities and cultural practices.

In the context of Malaysia (and other postcolonial states), colonial history plays a major role in defining the postcolonial dynamics and discourses. This continuity is a running theme of *Taming Babel*, influencing how its three parts are arranged. In Malaysia (i.e. the Babel that needs to be tamed), communal relations have long been constructed along the insider/outsider dialectic (*Melayu* vs. *Cina*), and this is reflected across its social and political practices and institutions. However, in place of well-rehearsed analyses that focus on formal practices and institutions, Leow highlights the dynamics of language practices and their discursive role in shaping those racial categories. Languages are fluid, diverse, and constantly evolving. They escape the technocratic gaze of the modern state. If state-centred narratives have thus far been seen as the ultimate normative and institutional demarcator of what is acceptable and unacceptable, Leow shows the contingency and historicity of such stories. In using the term plurilingualism instead of multilingualism, Leow invites us to think about the *political* power of language, rather than about its institutional form.

In Part I (which contains Chapters 1 and 2), Leow examines how the monoglot British colonial state governed polyglot societies. The story is one of difficulty. Essentially, the British saw plurilingual British Malaya as an obstacle to effective governance. Here, Leow shows how language exposed the chaos and incompetence of the colonial administration, despite the latter's deployment of a modern civil service in British Malaya. Chapter 1 demonstrates the British inability to understand fully the languages of the various Chinese speaking communities, which were very much influenced by the complexities of the diaspora communities. The variety of ways language and dialects were spoken, for example, was influenced by the cultural intersectionalities that occurred as a result of the interactions of these communities with local Malayan cultures, in addition to their regional connections to China. While there may have been 'experts' who mastered the Chinese languages, there was a distinct lack of sensitivity to how shifting contexts influenced how those languages were spoken. At the heart of the British administration's approach to the Chinese languages in Malaya was the belief that their diversity posed

a great danger to the colonial administration. This diversity had to be tamed and managed through a language technocracy, which served the British linguistic needs through bureaucratic governance. Further, Chapter 2 shows that while the theme of taming was also essential in the administration of the Malay language, the strategy that was deployed by the British colonial administration differed, with an approach that was more “developmental” (p. 57). In part, the Malay language was subjected to an orthographic transformation. Crucial in this process was the formalisation of the language, by which the transition from the Arabic to Romanised script played a basic role. Alongside this development was the shift from manuscript to print, through which dictionaries were developed in order to control the development of the Malay language. These strategies in taming the Chinese and Malay languages managed to establish a lasting impact on the socio-political configuration of British Malaya, one that was underpinned by resentment to one another from both the *Cina* and *Melayu* sides.

Part II traces the development of a more politicised moment in the governance of language in British Malaya. In Chapter 3, Leow examines the context of the immediate aftermath of World War II. Considering the impact of the war, including the Japanese occupation on polyglot societies and vernacular communities in British Malaya (as well as Indonesia), this was a period of turbulence. This was also a period during which there was a proliferation of politically enlightened political movements which were starting to agitate against colonialism, including contesting colonial vocabularies in the vernacular languages. Against this background we see the rise of lexical innovations in the Malay language that were politically charged. This profoundly impacted the colonial administration, as it tried to regain an upper hand in the contestations, through the deployment of the conservative means of control (i.e. the taming strategy) as were used previously. Chapter 4 adds a further layer to these discursive developments, by way of tracing the development of propaganda and public relations to bridge the disconnect between the government and the people. Of specific importance is the context of the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960). Moving away from well-rehearsed narratives about the Emergency era – “the high political and counterinsurgency” and the “militant triumphalist” approaches (p. 135) – Leow demonstrates the challenges that the colonial government faced, in the presence of people with whom it could no longer speak

directly. This scramble resulted in the innovation of new technologies of communication, which were ineffective because of the lack of communicators. From here, Leow shows us why the communist insurgency managed to make an impact on the population against the (un)influential colonial state, to the extent that the latter had to resort to adopting the method of communist communication to get its message across.

Part III, which consists of Chapter 5, takes us to the context of postcolonial Malaya/Malaysia. Malay, or *Melayu* identity is carried by various vectors, but in the postcolonial context (minus Singapore today), it is the Malay language that oscillates between acting as a source of linguistic unity of all citizens and a means of expression of the *Melayu* hegemony over others. According to Leow, the latter is shaped by “(a) mentality of crisis” (p. 180), indicating a reproduction of colonial patronage of the *Melayu* identity, which was nurtured politically through the recognition of its special position in British Malaya. To demonstrate this, Leow examines the role of the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), the state-sponsored agency tasked with administering the Malay language in postcolonial Malaya/Malaysia. DBP, against the pluriethnic and plurilingual reality of the population, worked in the name of the state to push through a monolingual policy (against other possible alternatives). Today, in the absence of the official recognition of the importance of other languages in Malaysia, the cost has been racial harmony, as well a society that truly embraces the spirit of pluralism.

In the presence of such modern governmentality in Malaysia, does it mean that all hope is lost? The proliferation of alternatives – “creoles, pidgins, languages, dialects, and codes” (p. 19) – beneath the threshold of language policing suggests the negative. And this proliferation is for the most part the discursive effect of governance and policing themselves. As such, limits and frontiers that have been erected by the modern state are, in the Lacanian sense, a *fantasy*. They are means to pretend fullness, to cover over the contingencies of social reality. Leow’s rich analysis has shown that forces below the threshold of recognition continue to push the limits that define the fantasies of the modern state. And, as she has discussed in her Postscript, these forces tend to affect real change. Leow alludes to the gains that were made in Malaysia’s twelfth general elections in 2008 (which she wrongly calls the thirteenth

[p. 216]), which, including the thirteenth in 2013, sent the message to the long ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) government that the taming strategy may no longer work. *Taming Babel* was published before the fourteenth general elections in May 2018, which has seen BN fall for the first time in 61 years. Malaysia now heads into an exciting, if yet uncertain future. In place of tired narratives that reproduce problematic racialised and ethnicised categories, Leow uncovers and shows us the insurgent potential of language in constructing alternative social, cultural and political visions for our society.



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